

Filming *Waterloo*

Tom Zubrycki.

By the late 40's the Labor Party was getting out of touch. These people who'd grown up in the slums had their positions of power through the system – the party. The windscreen survey: they'd drive up in their cars, get out, and look at this place and that. They'd been sold a dream by those people saying 'root out the filthy slums'. And all they were doing worked right against their own class.

- Margaret Barry, from *Waterloo*

Waterloo was my first film. In the mid 1970s I'd got to know one of the prime 'movers and shakers' of South Sydney, Margaret Barry, and decided to make a film about her and about the suburb of Waterloo whose wholesale demolition she was battling to stop. Margaret was a fiery and stropky agitator of formidable repute. She knew no bounds in confronting local politicians, government ministers and bureaucrats. Marg was a larger than life character who took on the establishment.

The documentary grew out of my video work in the mid-70s and the connections I'd made with people protesting against the break-up of inner-city communities. In the early 70s the Robert Askin Liberal government created a blueprint for the wholesale re-development of inner Sydney – replete with an expressway carving up Glebe and Ultimo, plus massive office developments in Woolloomooloo and the Rocks. The Builders Labourers Federation imposed Green Bans, while residents sat in front of bulldozers defending their homes and communities. I was one of a small group of video-makers documenting a "class war" over the future of Sydney's urban landscape.

In Waterloo, an area adjacent to Redfern, and which has an intertwined history and geography, the New South Wales Housing Commission intended to demolish small worker-owned terraces to build 30-storey towers. In 1972 the Commission sent residents a letter saying their homes had been gazetted for resumption and acquisition. The residents, mostly post-war migrants, had bought their houses before the property boom in the early 70s, when home ownership in South Sydney was still within the reach of low-income earners.

The letter, needless to say, created fear and panic: many sold-up quickly and had little option but move west to the city's outskirts. The Housing Commission then proceeded to border up the resumed places, some of which were squatted, others vandalised. Green Bans were imposed on the whole area and Margaret Barry started her resident action group representing those who *refused* to budge. It became a fight to the bitter end.

Waterloo has a remarkable history. It is one of Sydney's oldest residential areas, it was the home of the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, which housed a huge workforce under one roof. It was also a suburb which was very significant in the development of the Labour movement and the Labor Party in NSW. Why, therefore, did the Party abandon the very people who were its most fervent supporters? How did the Housing Commission, a public housing authority set up by the State Labor government in the 1940s, get to the stage of evicting workers to build more public housing? These were key questions I wanted to explore in the film.

Margaret had a great sense of the past: she knew every planning scheme, every Labor premier, and every government minister responsible for this misguided and ill-conceived ideology of clearing-up and sanitising inner city suburbs. To illustrate Marg's thesis I did an extensive archive search. One gem was a Cinesound-Movietone newsreel about post World War 2 reconstruction that blamed the slums for health hazards, traffic chaos and delinquency, proposing the answer to all these problems in the form of neat cottages on quarter acre blocks in Blacktown, all with easy access to amenities which were never built!

The contemporary footage in the film is largely about the residents struggle against the Housing Commission. Internal debates, compromises and disagreements over strategies are all recorded. Should they have taken a firmer line over squatting? Does the demand for consultation lead to co-option? What is responsible planning? Some of the interviews included Jack Bourke (head of the Housing Commission) who became the Resident Action Group's prime target, and William McKell (born in Waterloo, Labor Premier, Governor General and key figure in the establishment of the Housing Commission). Both talk to the camera revealing an unshakeable conviction in their own benevolence. Equally bizarre is the scene where the Queen comes to open one of the towers. She gets a warm welcome from the residents while the narration points out that the cost of the honorary rock installed to commemorate this event could have repaired several houses.

The film was finally finished in 1980 and the very first screening was at a church hall in Redfern that at that time was the office for South Sydney Community Aid. A 16mm projector was set-up at the back near the choir, and a large screen somewhere near the pulpit. The place was packed with locals – many seeing themselves in the film. Spirits were high because there was plenty to celebrate. The Housing Commission had only months earlier abandoned its plans for the tower blocks, and had commenced building medium density walk-up apartments instead. The houses planned for resumption had been spared, and rehabilitation of the blighted boarded-up properties had begun.

The film, meanwhile, had started its journey to festivals and cinemas. This was always a challenge for filmmakers. Back in the 70s and 80s, making films was one thing, finding audiences for them was another. (As recently as the early 80s the Australian Broadcasting Commission refused to buy-in independently made documentaries). I was an active member of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, and our little cinema in St Peter's Lane, Darlinghurst, was the venue for independently made first release shorts, features and documentaries. People flocked to this 100-seat cinema to see films they would normally never see anywhere else. The film became a popular teaching resource in universities and colleges nation-wide for many years after it was made, and can still be borrowed from local libraries.

Waterloo is a record of a time and reflects the mood that infused the early resident action movement in Sydney. That movement is still very much alive today.

For clips from *Waterloo*:

<http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/waterloo>

For purchasing a copy:

<http://www.tomzubrycki.com/sales.html>